

Ezra 3:8-13
 The Dwelling Place of God
 Tampa Covenant Church
 01 August 2021

Proposition: As God's chosen people, we praise him for fulfilling his promise of redemption through a sure foundation in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Who continues to build us up into a holy dwelling through the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit.

FCF: Failure to build on the foundation that is Christ – Worship & Unity

RHF: Jesus Christ is the true tabernacle and temple of God who dwells with the people of God.

Introduction: We are continuing our OT Summer Series entitled Redemption Stories – Whispers of our Savior. And I trust that you've come to see the beauty of the OT and how it anticipates the person and work of Christ. Today we'll look in book Ezra and delve into the life of the post-exilic community; those who returned from exile and we'll discover how the LORD works through ordinary means to make his dwelling with his people.

Proclamation/Impetus To Rebuild: *Cyrus' Decree*

When we open the book of Ezra, it's the dawning of a new era in the history of God's people. After 70 years of exile, hope of freedom has become reality. It's the first year of Cyrus' reign and the LORD is at work stirring this pagan king to make a proclamation and this is a big deal: **Cyrus says in v.2**, "*The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem. Cyrus continues, whoever is among you, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem.*" **And at the end of chap 2**, we find out just under 50K of God's people returned to Jerusalem.¹

(Blank) There's nothing flashy about what took place: Proclamation made, vessels returned, and people departed. We don't see anything close to what happened in the Exodus account? Recall, Moses and Aaron go to Pharaoh with a word from the LORD, "*let my people go that they may hold a feast to me in the wilderness.*" Pharaoh retorts, "*Who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice and let Israel go?*" Thus, the LORD reveals himself to Pharaoh and deals with his defiance through powerful plagues and miracles, culminating in the deliverance of his people and the destruction of the Egyptian army.

Likewise, in our text today, God is freeing his people from captivity but he seems to be doing it in a normal and ordinary fashion and maybe that's why the story may not grab our attention like the Exodus account. But when we put on our spiritual lenses and look a little closer, we see the LORD's sovereign hand at work in reconstituting his people. Specifically, the LORD is working through Cyrus...stirring his heart to fulfill the words spoken through the prophets Jeremiah and Isaiah long before Cyrus comes to power.

- **The LORD says** through Jeremiah in 25:11 and following: "This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. Then after seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity, declares the LORD, making the land an everlasting waste." Done! Babylon was defeated and Cyrus' proclamation ended the 70 years of captivity.
- **And in issuing this proclamation**, Cyrus was acting as God's appointed shepherd as foretold by the prophet Isaiah some 150 years earlier. We read these verses together in our OT passage, the LORD said of Cyrus: "*He is my shepherd, and he shall fulfill all my purpose, saying of Jerusalem, 'she shall be built,' and of the temple, 'Your foundation shall be laid.'*"

We look in 1:5 and the author tells us God also stirred the hearts of the Priests, Levites and the leaders of the tribes of Benjamin and Judah... Rebuild the temple of the **(Blank) LORD**. Therefore, it's not Cyrus nor the first wave of returnees who deserve credit for this initiative. No, this was the LORD's initiative. And in his appointed time, he brought his words to completion by stirring the hearts of men to do his will.

Transition: So the LORD is clearly at work and his people are off to a great start.

Priority of Worship: *Rebuilding the Temple*

Once they arrive in Jerusalem, we read in 3:6, *"From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the LORD BUT the foundation of the temple of the LORD was not yet laid."* In other words, there was more work to be done. We don't have pictures depicting the condition of the temple but we know the Babylonians burned it to the ground. What was once central to the worship of God's people now lay in ruins and the rebuilding of the temple was paramount to the nation's restoration. Why? Because the temple was where the LORD came to dwell with his people. And God's presence was integral to Israel, from the place of his presence, he revealed his will and poured out his blessing on his people.²

Recall in 2 Samuel 7, The LORD has given David rest from all his enemies, the ark of the covenant was now back in Jerusalem and David says to Nathan, *"See now, I dwell in a house of cedar, but the ark of God dwells in a tent."* We know David purposed to build a house for the LORD but he was a man of war and so the mantle fell on Solomon to build the house for the LORD's name. Nonetheless, David by the Spirit of God, drew up the plans, financed the building project and purchased the temple site.³ And in the 4th year of Solomon's reign, construction began and it was a massive undertaking and took 7 years to complete. And before Solomon dedicates the temple to God, he summons the priests to carry the ark of the covenant into the holy of holies where they placed it beneath the wings of the cherubim, the ark contained the stone tablets from the covenant at Sinai. **And we read,** *"when the priests came out of the Holy Place, a cloud filled the house of the Lord, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord."*

This is what the post-exilic community was seeking....the presence of the LORD in the temple and no price was too high. In v.7, they gave money to carpenters and masons; food drink and oil to Sidonians and Tyrians to bring cedar from Lebanon, which was a page out of Solomon's playbook. In the 2nd year of their arrival, they began the work, Zerubbabel, Jeshua, their families, priests, Levites and all who came to Jerusalem out of captivity. And they paid attention to the details in assigning the Levites as supervisors of all the workmen. I imagine there was a high level of enthusiasm, cooperation and synergy as they participated in meaningful work together. **And in v.10-11,** we read *"when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments came forward with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD, according to the directions of David King of Israel. And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD, "For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel."* The people were shouting with a great shout, they praised the LORD...because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid.

Transition: And as these praises were going up. **The author tells** us many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid, though many shouted aloud **(Blank) for joy**. The author continues that people couldn't distinguish the sounds of joy from the sound of weeping and it could be heard far away.

The True Temple: *Our LORD and Savior Jesus Christ*

It's hard to make sense of this. Some would say the elderly wept with tears of joy at the work being accomplished. While others would maintain they were tears of disappointment because this temple would be a matchbox compared to Solomon's. We really don't know. But it's clear the aged in the community had a reference point to draw from while the younger did not. It speaks to the nature of community and the beauty of God's grace as it is sufficient for the tears and for the shouts of joy.

If you continue reading through the book of Ezra, you discover after the foundation was laid, the work on the temple ceased for about 16 years due to pagan opposition and the people turned their attention to personal matters instead of the LORD's. But the LORD's steadfast love and faithfulness endured through their fear and sinful neglect of their spiritual priorities. **We open to Haggai 1** and the LORD speaks through his prophet... *"Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins? Thus says the LORD of Hosts: consider your ways, Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, that I may take pleasure in it and that I may be glorified says the (Blank) LORD."* The people heed the word of the LORD through the prophet Haggai and Zechariah...and finish the temple by decree of God of Israel and by decree of Cyrus and Darius and Artaxerxes King of Persia. And we're told the people of Israel, the priests and the Levites and the rest of the Levites, and the rest of the returned exiles, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy.

We look back at the story and it should be obvious who deserves the credit for the rebuilding of the temple. Not the returning exiles, Cyrus or the pagan kings who followed. It's the LORD, who stirred the hearts of all involved to do his good and perfect will for his glory and his glory alone. This temple would stand for another 500 years and when we turn to the NT, we see it was replaced by an even greater temple built by Herod the Governor of Judea. By this time the temple resembled more of a market place than a house of worship. In John 2, we find Jesus in this very temple during Passover. And what is he doing? He's turning over tables, making whips with cords and ridding the temple of those using it for personal gain. The Jews demand a sign from him to prove his authority. **Jesus responds,** *"Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up."* They **(Blank) counter,** it has taken 46 years to build this temple...you'll raise it up in three days? John tells us Jesus was speaking about the temple of his body and after his body was raised from the dead, the disciples believed the scriptures and the word Jesus had spoken.

Transition: Church today the LORD calls us to **believe** that Jesus is the true temple of God in whom the glory of God dwells. And he calls us to **believe** that he is the word made flesh who now dwells with us by the power of the Spirit. Thus, we also **believe** we can boldly approach the throne of God because of Christ's sacrifice for our sin. If we believe this to be true, how shall we then shall we live?

#1: Praise And Thank God for Our Sure Foundation

When the foundation was laid, we see the people had church! It wasn't a time for back slapping and high fiving for a job well done!! No, it was time to don the vestments, grab the instruments and praise God for his steadfast, enduring love! If Christ is our sure foundation, we build on that foundation with praise and thanksgiving for his sacrificial love toward us. We're no strangers to words of praise, scripture has given us the language...we are called to use them in our worship.

- **Psalm 106:1-** Praise the LORD! Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever
- **Psalm 107:1-** Oh give thanks to the LORD for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.
- **Psalm 136:1** (26x): Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.

(Blank) Get the point? We are to thank and praise the LORD because he's good and his steadfast love endures forever. After years of living in a foreign land, unable to praise the LORD, the people erupted in praise to God. They weren't focused on the work yet to be completed...no, they were focused on what the LORD had already accomplished by his sovereign hand. Their hearts were stirring in praise to God because their hearts were marked by God. Our hearts have been marked by God, through the blood of Christ. Thus, we are privileged each LORD's Day to enter into the gospel story; our story! God calls us into his presence, we stand in awe of his holiness, convicted of sin, confess and repent, receive an assurance of pardon, and celebrate our redemption and restoration, receive his word, fellowship at his table and go out to shine as lights in the world.

#2 Remain Unified On Our Sure Foundation

The apostle Paul says to the church at Ephesus in that **2nd Chapter**, *"In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit."* I look over at our chapel and I'm reminded that each stone is uniquely different; however, they have been fitted together and they are unified in their purpose of forming wall. **One writer said**, *"The will of God will never be done by us until the spirit within us is stirred up to do it."*⁴ We saw how this is played out in the narrative. With stirred hearts, about 50K people returned to Jerusalem and engaged in meaningful work together. Yes, we also recall the mixed reactions after the foundation was laid. Some wept while others shouted but I have to believe they remained unified in purpose. They were in a hostile environment, surrounded by pagans who did their best to put an end to their rebuilding effort. But through the grace of God the work was completed.

Paul is clear that our unity (being built together) is only made possible in Christ by the Spirit. Nothing else on earth will bind us together into eternity. God is the same yesterday, today and forever. He always moves first in stirring our hearts according to his will. This is the very thing that distinguishes a church from a social club. Our initiatives are not man centered; rather they are God centered, rooted and grounded in his sovereign plan. This speaks to the unity we're called to as a body of believers because the common thread is the LORD working in our hearts through his spirit. This is how the gospel works. It frees us from the bondage of sin and brings us into fellowship with God and each other. And we labor together with our differing gifts, to build one another up in Christ and share the good news of Christ. And when we do this together out of a heart of love and obedience to the LORD, the community flourishes and souls are saved and the glory does not belong to us the glory belongs to him and him alone.

Conclusion:

Church in this epoch of redemptive history we look to Christ. He's our true tabernacle; he's our true temple and the one most worthy of thanksgiving and praise. He is the reason why we are one. Therefore, we live with hope that there is coming a day where our faith will be sight and we will dwell in the presence of our LORD forever. In Revelation 21, John hears a loud voice from the throne saying, *"Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He shall dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."*

¹ **Forty-two thousand three hundred and sixty** The sum of the various groups mentioned in this chapter is only 29,818, which is 12,542 less than the number given in this verse. It is possible that women and children were not included in the initial numbers but were included in the final tally. It is also possible that not all families are listed in the individual tabulations. John D. Barry et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016), Ezr 2:64.

² R. J. McKelvey, "Temple," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner, electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 807.

³ See 1 Chr 22:3–5, 14; 28:2, 11–19. David also purchased the temple site where the plague, which had decimated Israel because of his sinful pride in taking a national census, was averted 2 Sm 24.

⁴ Smith, James, and Robert Lee. *Handfuls on Purpose for Christian Workers and Bible Students, Series I–XIII*. Five-volume edition. Vol. 6. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971.